

# Latin A-Z

## Peter Glare

1982 has seen the publication of the last fascicule of the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, the first major new Latin-English dictionary to be published in over a century. The work was begun in May 1931 and has taken therefore just over fifty years to complete. To celebrate this monument to both scholarship and endurance, **Omnibus** asked the editor of the *OLD*, Peter Glare, who first joined the project in 1950, to tell us something of its background and design.

*Si quem dura manet sententia iudicis olim  
Damnatum aerumnis suppliciumque caput.  
Hunc nequefebrili lassent ergastula massa  
Nec rigidas vexent fossa metalla manus:  
Lexica contexat, nam cetera quid moror? omnes  
Poenarum facies hic labor unus habet.*

To paraphrase it roughly: If you are looking for a sentence for your condemned criminal, don't send him to the workshop or the mine. Let him write dictionaries – this one task comprehends every kind of punishment. This verse written by the great scholar Joseph Scaliger (1540 – 1609) is typical of the feelings expressed by lexicographers throughout the ages about their labours. If compiling a dictionary is such a wearisome task, why in this century was it necessary to produce a new dictionary of Classical Latin? Very few new words have been discovered since the last major dictionaries were published. The large quantities of papyrus dug up in Egypt have included very little Latin and although there is a steady flow of newly-found inscriptions, the contents of these are mostly standard formulae. They have, of course, great value for the historian, but are less interesting to the lexicographer. A few of the modest number of new words that do appear in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* may serve to illustrate their unimportance. There is *cadium* 'a jar', *contrarete* 'a gladiator who opposed a *retiarius*'; and *cerineus* 'made of wax'; of these, the first is a transliteration of a word already well-known in Greek, and the others compounds of words familiar in Latin and whose meaning can easily be guessed in their contexts.

### Ingots and Centurions

A more important reason for writing a new dictionary is that our stock of knowledge is constantly being increased, and the information given in the definitions has to be brought up to date. Two small examples, one scientific and one historical, may show what I mean. The word *tubulus* is defined in Lewis & Short as (i) a small pipe or tube, water-pipe; (ii) a smoke pipe; (iii) (transf.) a bar of metal, pig, ingot. One would have expected that whatever applications the word had, the essential sense would be that of a more or less long-shaped object with a hole down the middle. But equally it is part of general knowledge that molten metal hardens into bars which are called ingots, and so when Pliny used the word *tubulus* in

this context, it is not surprising that lexicographers defined it as ingot. However, if you consult a metallurgist. you will find that in some conditions at least molten metals harden with a hollow centre; the ancients were aware of this, and Pliny was using the word in its natural sense. *Primipilaris* was described by Lewis & Short as 'the centurion of the first maniple of the *triarii*'; we think that it is now more accurately defined as 'the centurion commanding the first century of the first cohort'. One would have to be bold to assert that that is the last word. There are other forms of updating which have been forced on us by circumstances quite outside our control. Geographical names, for instance, which go back to the old Austro-Hungarian Empire may very well prove a cause of irritation to sensitive national feelings today. And the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* itself was caught out by the process of metrication which was introduced half-way through its career.

With all this the main impetus to the compilation of a new dictionary came from dissatisfaction with the quality of the old ones. Lewis & Short was published over a hundred years ago in 1879, and a lot of lexicographical experience has been gained since then – one has only to mention the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which has set entirely new standards. But Lewis & Short itself was only an enlargement, put together in a comparatively short space of time, of a dictionary brought out in 1850 by E. A. Andrews, and this was an abridged translation of the Latin-German dictionary of Wilhelm Freund. Nor was this at all an original work, but a development of earlier dictionaries. And so on. There are many disadvantages in this method of procedure. Senses which were based on all too flimsy evidence begin, by constant repetition, to be taken for granted; over the years new texts become available, and a passage which was used to illustrate one sense of a word is now made to mean something quite different. From this a new quotation is added to the article, but often the old quotation with the old sense is not removed.

## **Gardens of Words**

Finally we have to consider the purpose of a particular dictionary. Dictionaries began with the work of the glossators and grammarians of antiquity. As early as the 5th century B.C. readers began to have difficulty in understanding some of the vocabulary of the Homeric poems, and explanations, very often quite fantastic, were proposed by the grammarians for these words. Such explanations began to be assembled in an approximately alphabetical order, and with the passage of time more and more literature, Latin and Greek, required elucidation of this kind. There was, however, no idea yet of a comprehensive dictionary of either language.

With the break-up of the Roman Empire and the rise of regional languages in those territories came the need for bilingual dictionaries. In Britain a Latin-Anglo-Saxon glossary survives in part from the 8th century and what might be called a Latin-English one was written c. A.D. 1000 by Aelfric, Abbot of Eynsham, near Oxford. His object was the very practical one of enabling his monks to perform worthily the liturgy of the Church and this remained the prime concern of glossaries until the fifteenth century and the growth of secular education. The first English-Latin dictionary in the form of the dictionaries we know today was published in

1440, and its title, *Promptorium Parvulorum*, is a clear indication of the market for which it was intended. A Latin-English dictionary, the *Hortus Vocabulorum*, written at the end of the century explains its purpose in a preface. 'Not unworthily called the Garden of Words, for just as in gardens are found abundance of flowers, of herbs and of fruits with which our bodies are strengthened and our spirits refreshed, so in this work are diverse words accommodated to a beginner desirous of the pleasures of learning... A work useful and profitable to all desirous of a knowledge of arts and sciences...' As printed texts of the classical authors became available, teachers insisted more and more on the authority of the best Latin stylists for the words their pupils used, but it was assumed that the main purpose of Latin was to act as a vehicle for the transmission of learning and international exchange.

As Latin ceased to be used for practical purposes and became an educational subject for its own sake, the process began whereby imitation of the best classical authors became an object in itself. So dictionaries gave extra attention to those authors, and made a point of quoting phrases which could be copied safely in school compositions. Thus Lewis & Short is full of signposts - 'Not in Cicero', 'Post-classical', 'Not in classical prose' and so on. Such statements are in any case unreliable, and include the astonishing one that the dative of *nemo* is rare and not in Cicero.

### **A million quotations**

If I might risk a generalization about our present attitude to Latin, it is that the Roman civilization was a remarkable one – perhaps the most important single influence on our modern culture – and so one that we cannot ignore if we wish to understand ourselves, and that we cannot appreciate it properly, unless we can read at first hand the records on which our knowledge of it is chiefly based. Thus our dictionary should help us to read all these records, not only the ones with conspicuous literary merit, but those which contribute in any way to our understanding of that civilization.

This is the principle on which the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* has been written. It began, not with any existing dictionary, but with a thorough reading of all the extant texts. Classical Latin is in a way in a fortunate position; the total number of texts is quite small and most of them are in a reasonably intelligible condition. There is, by contrast, much more Greek in existence and a great deal of it is, from its fragmentary nature, extremely difficult to interpret. Such a reading had never been done before, and in this sense at least *OLD* is the first original Latin-English dictionary. The product of this reading was a collection of quotations numbering between three-quarters of a million and a million. They were written on slips measuring 6 by 4 inches and sorted alphabetically according to the words they illustrated. Common words might be represented by several hundred quotations while of course many words only occur once in extant documents.

The first stage in editing an article was to read the relevant quotations and to try and arrive at an unprejudiced estimate of the word concerned, before consulting commentaries, other dictionaries, and so on. It is only occasionally that such a proceeding produces a different

interpretation from the traditional one, but one must be constantly alert for the possibility. For instance, a comparison of all the adjectives compounded with the prefix *prae-* suggested that the proper meaning of the word used by Horace to describe himself, *praecanus*, is 'very grey' rather than the traditional 'prematurely grey'.

### **The Problem of Definition**

The form of the articles in *OLD* is obviously derived from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. There are three main constituents, the preliminary matter, the definitions and the quotations. The first of these gives notes on etymology, forms, prosody, construction and so on. The definitions are for the user perhaps the most important part, but they must be used with caution. It has to be remembered that they are only signposts, not exact equivalents of the words concerned. Even within a single language there is probably no such thing as a perfect synonym. If you are dealing with two languages of two different countries and separated by two thousand years, close correspondence of terms will be much harder to obtain. Similarly the arrangement of the senses into a particular order is often a gross simplification of a very complicated development; any single quotation may carry overtones of a number of different senses.

In view of the purpose of our dictionary it is clear that the definition should not be primarily a slick modern parallel to the Latin word, but should convey to the user as nearly as possible what it meant to a Roman. Sometimes it can be done with a single word, but it has to be remembered that a rose is not quite the same as what the Roman typically thought of when he used the word *rosa*, that a *mensa* is not the same object as we sit round on chairs, and so on. Words like 'captain', 'colonel' and 'staff-officer' have military, political and social connotations which are quite alien to ancient Rome and ought to be avoided in the definition of military ranks. And in the longer articles one should try to avoid giving the impression that the word can be specially identified with any single English one. *uerus* is a good example. Most people say that *uerus* meant 'true'; in fact, it more often coincides in use with our 'real', but it is not exactly either.

Finally, a brief word about the quotations. Their main purpose is to support the definitions, which should always be read in conjunction with them. They are also arranged to indicate the chronological spread of the word within the period covered by the dictionary (from the beginnings to about A.D. 200) and the kinds of writer (poet, historian, etc.) who used it. So it is hoped that the user will get something of the 'feel' of a word and know in what context he is likely to encounter it.

The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* is perhaps the last Latin-English dictionary to be completed without the aid of computers, though the great international *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* being prepared in Munich is also based on material collected by hand. The real work of a lexicographer can in no way be done by a computer, but if ever a new approach to Latin demands a new dictionary, a computer will certainly be involved in the collection of material, and future lexicographers will be saved some at least of the hard labour of which their

predecessors have complained so insistently. Not that I expect the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* to be superseded for a few years yet!

*Peter Glare was editor of the Oxford Latin Dictionary from 1954 to 1982. He has now moved into Greek as the editor of the Liddell and Scott Supplement.*